

# Domaine Mercuri

## Ichthis Peninsula, Greece

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### THE STUNNING NATURAL BEAUTY OF THIS REMOTE PENINSULA TRANSLATES INTO ITS WINES.

*Kelli White began her career in the wine industry as the general manager and wine buyer for University Wine Shop in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Mass. She has since traveled to many of the world's wine regions and, following a stage in Burgundy, has settled in New York City. She sold wine for Domaine Select for two years and now works as a sommelier at the acclaimed Veritas restaurant.*

Perhaps it was the Jurassic squawking of the peacocks that first led me to believe I had traveled backward in time. Proudly roaming the estate, they split the air with a shrieking that contrasted sharply with their stately countenances. Sharing the blame for my sense of unreality was the swollen grapefruit swinging on overhead limbs. We were invited to help ourselves, yet reaching up to grab these unearthly orbs—giant, round, and yellow—seemed as impossible as grasping the sun itself.

Breaks in the surrounding olive groves revealed hidden vineyards, and a fresh, salty tang in the air announced the proximity of the Ionian Sea. I had heard of the beauty of the Mercuri estate, but I wasn't prepared for its lush wildness. I was sure of one thing, however, as I filed





## TERROIR



Mercouri estate on the Ichthis Peninsula (left top); Christos and Vassilis Kanellakopoulos (left bottom); tasting room (above); peacocks (below); main estate building (bottom).

into the tasting room with the rest of the uninitiated: if these wines didn't blow my mind, it was going to break my heart.

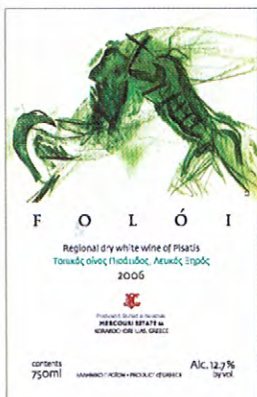
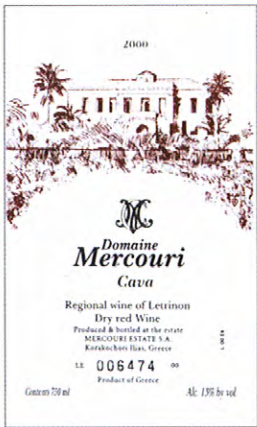
Luckily for my cardiologist, my heart was never at risk—the wines of Domaine Mercouri are deservedly legendary. In fact, these sturdy, robust reds and fanciful whites were the highlight of my entire Grecian odyssey. In Greece, of course, antiquity is a way of life, so it's a bit misleading to say that the wines of Domaine Mercouri are unique because they have a history extending back more than a century. Many a winemaking family in Greece measures its tradition in millennia. The difference is that Domaine Mercouri, beginning with its founding in 1864, was among the first to experiment with international varieties, to depart from indigenous quaffers in an effort to create true *vins de garde*, and to participate as a serious contender in the global wine market.

Theodoros Mercouri was a successful Greek businessman who spent considerable time abroad. Attracted to the dark, tannic reds of northeast Italy, he sought to reproduce that style in his native Greece. In 1864, when he purchased the land that would become Domaine Mercouri, he planted it with Refosco del Peduncolo Rosso cuttings he had carried over from Friuli. His selection of location was fortuitous: not only did the Refosco vines thrive, but their proximity to the sea facilitated export. By the end of the 19th century, Mercouri's wines were widely traded in many parts of Europe.

Theodoros died in 1897, leaving the estate in the hands of his son Leonidas, who built the area's first modern winery. This remarkable facility remained functional until 1960, when Leonidas's daughters, Maria and Kate, abandoned winemaking and began selling off their grapes. In 1985,







Mercouri winery reception area (top); Refosco vineyard (above).

Maria's two sons, Vassilis and Christos Kanellakopoulos, took control of the estate, rebuilding the winery and ushering in the modern age of Domaine Mercouri. With the fourth generation of the family, the business model initiated by Theodoros is back in full swing, and the wines of Mercouri are enjoyed all over Europe and North America.

Technically a part of the Peloponnese, the southernmost section of the Greek mainland, Domaine Mercouri remains distant from its regional cousins. Not only do its wines differ dramatically in style from Nemea's Agiorgitiko and Mantinia's Moschofileros, but while most Peloponnesian grapes are grown in the mountainous north and around the port of Patras, Mercouri lies on the opposite, western edge of the region. A mere discus toss from ancient Olympia, its vineyards sprawl across a fish-shaped piece of

land that juts out into the Ionian Sea—the Ichthis Peninsula. Here, the climate is decidedly maritime, and the vines enjoy a constant north-northwest summertime breeze that helps assure slow, even ripening. According to Vassilis Kanellakopoulos, the soil “is very good for the production of high-quality wines,” consisting of “littoral limestone—sand, fine-grained gravels, and fine shell fragments, together with sandy, clayous soil.”

Domaine Mercouri lives virtually alone in this enological heaven; no other wineries of note have taken root here. Because of its isolation and the use of non-indigenous grapes, Mercouri's wines fall outside the nation's Onomasía Proeléfseos Anotéras Piótitos (OPAP) and Onomasía Proeléfseos Eleghoméni (OPE) classification system and thus are eligible only for regional wine status, or Topikos Oinos (sometimes labeled VdP, or *vin de pays*, as in France). The Greek government recognizes three wine-growing regions around Domaine Mercouri: Letrina, the area closest to the estate, with the original Refosco plantings; Pisatis, on the slopes of Mount Folíi; and Ilia, a wider region encompassing a multitude of varieties, both native and imported.

Photo courtesy of Domaine Mercouri (top); photo by Andrea English; DWS (bottom)

Photo courtesy of Domaine Mercouri



## TERROIR

### OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Mercouri's top white wine is Folói, named for the mountain, from vineyards at 1,476-2,132 feet. Blended from 90% Roditis (a pink-skinned variety able to retain acidity at high temperatures) and 10% Viognier, the wine is crisp, clean, and balanced—a perennial award winner. A Fumé version is aged for nine months in Allier oak casks. Mercouri's other two whites, taking their names from the stars, complete the constellation: Kallisto, a limited-release blend of native Robola (highly acidic and lemony) and Assyrtiko (structured and ageworthy), and Coma Berenices, an oak-aged Viognier. Far from clumsy experiments with wood and international varieties, these wines are thoughtful, artful creations that speak to the talent and vision of the Kanellakopoulos brothers.

The estate reds, for which Mercouri is most famous, are based around the original Refosco plantings, within sight of the family residence. Refosco provides a bold, tannic character that the brothers balance beautifully with the sweetly aromatic and fleshy Mavrodaphne, generally including 15% of the latter in the estate wine and 20% in the Cava (the equivalent of a *riserva*). For the estate version, which at 5,800 cases makes up half of the winery's total annual production, the wine is aged 12 months in new Allier casks before blending and bottling. The Cava, sourced from the best plots, is aged an extra six months in barriques (one-third each from Allier, Nivers, and Vosges). Both wines are intensely fruity and well structured, but the Cava is a bit more robust and capable of long aging. The winery's entry-level red is another blend, in this case of the fresh and playful Avgoustiatis with the dark and brooding Mourvèdre. The result is a dry, highly aromatic wine that demands to be taken seriously.

As if this pantheon of wines weren't enough of a draw, Domaine Mercouri capitalizes on the staggering beauty of its grounds and its proximity to ancient Olympia by offering winery tours, complete with a modest museum detailing its 150-year history. As a visitor, you, too, can pet kittens and peacocks, eat grapefruit off the tree, and gaze past the island of Zante to where the fleet of Xerxes met its watery end—all with a glass of Kallisto in your hand. It seems unfair that so remote and exotic a place could produce such sincere and spirited wines. But that appears to be exactly what the gods ordained. And such is the magic, and the merit, of Domaine Mercouri. 🍷

Refosco vineyards.



#### **Kallisto, VdP Ilia** 2008 \$15

85% Assyrtiko, 15% Robola. A highly aromatic white that shows both floral notes and warm citrus aromas such as red grapefruit and pineapple. An initial hint of pinesap gives way to an almost seaweed-like brininess. On the palate, the wine is simultaneously mouthfilling and bracing.

#### **Folói Fumé, VdP Pisatis** 2008 \$25

100% Roditis, aged in 50%-new French oak for nine months (I tasted a four-month-old barrel sample). Lemon zest, ripe pear, and vanilla take turns as the dominant flavor in this interesting white. The judicious application of oak does not mute the naturally citrusy quality of the grape.

#### **Coma Berenices, VdP Ilia** 2008 \$20

100% Viognier, fermented and aged in 50%-new French oak for three months. Unusually high-toned for Viognier—fresh lemon squeezed on peach cobbler! The oak provides a complementary backdrop and structure in the form of lovely wood tannins.

#### **Mercouri Estate, VdP Letrina** 2001 \$25

This Refosco-Mavrodaphne blend offers notes of tomato sugar, candied violets, and cedar. It's less earthy than the Cavas, with more polished fruit, but also with more obvious oak.

#### **Mercouri Estate, VdP Letrina** 2006 \$19

Dark purple in hue, this wine marks the beginning of cold-soaking at the winery. It displays pronounced aromatics of toast, blackberries and their brambles, and thyme, along with intense fruit.

#### **Mercouri Estate Cava, VdP Letrina** 1997 \$45

Definitely at the height of its maturity, this brambly, dark wine comes in layers of raspberry, smoked meat, shiitake mushrooms, oolong tea, chocolate, and dried figs.

#### **Mercouri Estate Cava, VdP Letrina** 2000 \$41

A sweet-tomato nose, almost Brunello-like in its high-toned freshness, gives way to notes of Parmegiano cheese, black olives, rosemary, and beautiful cherry fruit. Very persistent finish.

#### **Mercouri Estate Cava, VdP Letrina** 2003 \$40

From a low-yielding vintage, this Cava presents delicious red-berry and leather flavors, carried by a more noticeable tannic structure. Although the wine is highly concentrated, its ample acidity keeps the power in check.

#### **Mercouri Estate Cava, VdP Letrina** 2004 \$30

A much more playful wine than its older counterparts. Ripe, warm cherry and strawberry fruit combines with black licorice and chocolate, overlaid by fine, dusty tannins.

Prices are estimated retail.